

Agents of Hope: God's Great Missionaries
Mission in a Pagan Land: Daniel and Company

Lesson #11 for September 13, 2008

Scriptures: Daniel 1-3,6.

1. Nebuchadnezzar attacked and conquered Jerusalem three times (606-605 B.C., 598-597 B.C., and 586-585 B.C.). The first time he did so, he asked his people to select a number of the very best young men—and possibly women—from among the Hebrews to take to the Babylonian court and give them training so they could serve him. How many Hebrew youth were chosen? How many qualified or fit the king's directions? "They had to be handsome, intelligent, well-trained, quick to learn, and free from physical defects, so that they would be qualified to serve in the royal court." (Daniel 1:4, *GNB*) These young people were to be selected from among "the young men of the royal family and of noble families." (Daniel 1:3, *GNB*)
2. What do we know about the conditions in Jerusalem under which Daniel and his three friends grew up? Jerusalem had become one of the worst places in the world because of corruption and the worship of pagan gods. When Daniel was a child, people offered sacrifices to idols and prayed to idols even in Solomon's Temple. (Jeremiah 7:16-28)
3. Were there some in Jerusalem who were regularly honoring God and serving him in their daily lives as they taught their children? (Deuteronomy 4:9,10; 6:6-9) Apparently, in spite of all that corruption, there were still some faithful families high up in society in Jerusalem who taught and directed their children to be faithful to the true God. How did those families do that in such a wicked environment? This lesson talks about some of the experiences of Daniel and his three friends in Babylon.
4. Were the schools of the prophets still active in Jerusalem?
5. What do you suppose those four young men were thinking as they marched—possibly in chains—all the way (about 500 miles) from Jerusalem to Babylon? Did they have opportunities to speak together and encourage one another? Like Joseph on his way to Egypt, did they determine to be faithful to God in every detail?
6. When they got to Babylon, they were given Babylonian names in honor of Babylonian gods.
7. What do we know about the diet that was offered from the king's table? Why did Daniel insist on eating only vegetables and drinking only water? What was the diet that Daniel and his three friends were given? The *King James Version* says "pulse." The broadest meaning of that word is "any food derived from plant origin." Thus, they probably receive fruits, nuts, and grains in abundance. They may even have had some choice. We have emphasized that Daniel chose the "pulse" because of dietary preferences. That seems to be contradicted by a later statement in Daniel. (Daniel 10:1-3) Does this imply that later in his life Daniel did eat meat and drink wine?
8. The rich foods and alcoholic drinks that were provided from the king's table were not only not particularly good for one's health, but they had also been offered to the Babylonian gods. Thus, if a Jewish young person were to eat those foods and become successful, his success would be attributed to the blessing by the Babylonian gods. Vegetables, because they were considered to be very low on the king's priority list, were almost certainly not offered to the

Babylonian gods. Thus, by requesting vegetables and water, Daniel and his friends not only got a healthier diet but one which would not be considered as having been blessed by the Babylonian gods. In that way, they rejected the Babylonian gods and honored Yahweh—Jehovah!

9. So, we see that Daniel and his friends refused to eat the king's food not just because it was "unclean" and probably not healthy, but predominantly because it had been offered to idols. That became such an important issue among the Jewish people in the early Christian church that at the first "general conference" session in Jerusalem—as recorded in Acts 15—the first requirement of Gentiles becoming Christians was to avoid food offered to idols. That was not to achieve salvation but so that the formerly-Gentile Christians would not be too repulsive to the formerly-Jewish Christians and they all could sit in the same church to worship.
10. A few years later, Paul having had experience with the people in Corinth and Ephesus wrote to the Corinthians and the Romans suggesting that offering food to idols had no effect on the food whatsoever. Therefore, they could go ahead and eat that food if they were "strong" in faith. (1 Corinthians 8 [especially 8:1-6]; 10:14-11:1 [especially 10:23-26]; Romans 14) Was Paul contradicting Daniel? Or were both of them trying to honestly reject idols as having any authority in their lives or in the lives of others around them? Were Daniel and Paul practicing "situation ethics"? What should we learn from putting these two stories together? By not eating the meat that had been offered to idols, were both Daniel and Paul rejecting foreign gods rather than embracing vegetarianism? It was a question of conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:25)

On the roads into Corinth stood temples to pagan gods. Anything of high value brought into the market in Corinth—mainly meat and wine—was "offered" to the pagan god at the temple. Thus, partaking of meat and wine bought in the marketplace was interpreted as acknowledging the "power" of those gods. Daniel rejected pagan gods by not eating meat while Paul rejected pagan gods by going ahead and eating meat bought in the market, indicating that the idol—and the pagan god—did not alter the food.

"Wine" in Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament) referred to the squeezed product of grapes. Since there was no adequate refrigeration at the time, the juice gradually fermented and became partially alcohol.

11. It was Nebuchadnezzar's desire to thoroughly integrate captives from all the subjugated nations into his court in Babylon. No doubt, he believed that as they were exposed to Babylonian wealth and levels of education, etc., that they would become faithful to him and his government, and then they could relate back to their individual peoples and nations. Thus, he immersed these young captives in the very best of Babylonian society and education. They were given Babylonian names and sent to the best university in the city. But Daniel and his three friends followed the moral principles that they had been taught by their parents, and they did not compromise or defile themselves with the Babylonian culture, customs, or diet.
12. Do you think there were other young Hebrews who did adapt to Babylonian culture and got lost in the crowd? How do you think Daniel and his three friends managed to keep their faith?
13. Did Daniel and his friends have access to any of the Hebrew Scriptures? Or did they only have access to those portions of Scripture that they had memorized?
14. We need to remember that it was God's original plan that the children of Israel—"planted" in Palestine at the "crossroads of the world"—would serve as "guiding lights" to all the nations around. Thus, the truth about God and His government and the gospel would be spread

throughout the world. That, of course, never happened. But in Daniel's day, a few select people "having gotten the message" were placed in key positions—even very high positions in foreign governments—where they could try to share or spread at least a little of the truth— that their whole nation had been intended to teach—to the entire world.

15. Why do you think Daniel and his three friends were so superior to their contemporaries in the schools of Babylon? Were they a part of a select group with advantages growing up in Jerusalem? Did they have a superior diet? Did they have access to God? Did God miraculously bless them?
16. Look at the *King James Version* of Daniel 1:15. Contrast that reading with some of the modern versions. What is the meaning of the expression "fairer and fatter"? How did Daniel and his friends actually look different after 10 days? One possibility is that they were much healthier to begin with. It is also likely that in the long journey across the desert from Jerusalem to Babylon, because of their background, they did not look as worn and emaciated as many of their associates. It is also possible that God intentionally blessed them in this test.
17. After having passed their final examinations with "flying colors," Daniel and his friends were placed in high positions in the government of Babylon. It was not long before the king had those memorable dreams. To the ancient Middle Eastern peoples, dreams were often regarded as being messages from God or the gods. (Genesis 40:5-7; Numbers 12:6; 1 Kings 3:5; Joel 2:28; contrast Jeremiah 23:25 and Zechariah 10:2) Clearly, God used the method of dreams and dream interpretations at times, but so did many of the pagan fortunetellers and dream interpreters. Did some prophets speak lies "in the name of" God?
18. It is very frequent that the content of dreams—or even the fact that one had a dream—is not remembered by the person having the dream after s/he awakens from sleep. In the story related in Daniel 2, if the king had been able to tell his dream to the fortunetellers, they would, no doubt, have come up with a plausible interpretation. Is that why God made certain that the king "forgot" his dream?
19. By revealing the dream and its interpretation to Daniel, God was making it very clear that Daniel and his three friends were His "channels" for revealing the truth to the Babylonian king and his court.
20. Nebuchadnezzar was obviously impressed and amazed when Daniel came up with the dream and its interpretation. While he did a number of things in later years to try to prevent the fulfillment of the interpretation as given by Daniel, later stories suggest that Nebuchadnezzar may even have become a believer in Daniel's God, Yahweh. (Daniel 4:36,37)
21. But the Devil did not give up easily. There were other tests to be met. Review the story of Daniel's three friends and their refusal to bow down to the golden idol. (Daniel 3:1-30) Once again, the God of heaven was glorified and news of that event, no doubt, traveled around the world with all those who returned from the Plain of Shinar. Where was Daniel at that time? Were there other Hebrews who did not bow down to the golden idol?
22. Incredible as it may seem, when the Babylonian government was overthrown by Cyrus and Darius, Daniel was recognized for his superior wisdom and abilities and soon had a position near the top of the Persian government! But standing in positions of power and authority like that clearly caused jealousy among those who were not so rewarded.
23. Was it presumptuous on the part of Daniel to continue praying with his window open and facing

Jerusalem even when he did so at threat to his life? Did he have to pray in exactly that way three times a day? Was Daniel demonstrating that human rules would not make him change his ways or his relationship with God? Was Daniel in effect saying, "I worship my God and I will continue to worship my God no matter what rules you make"? No doubt, his enemies were certain that they had trapped Daniel on that occasion. But God's angels were able to protect Daniel through the night in the den of lions, and the next day his enemies were defeated and destroyed.

24. These stories make great reading especially as children's stories. They have served to inspire generations of young Christians to be faithful. Was that the main function of those stories? Was the book of Daniel inspired and preserved by God for that purpose? Is there something more to learn from those stories?
25. What do we learn about God from the book of Daniel? Do you think Daniel was a missionary? How many people do you think will be in the kingdom of heaven because of the testimony and witness of Daniel and his three friends? How many from their time? How many because of their story in the Bible?
26. Might we be expected some day to stand up before Congress or Parliament and witness for our faith? Will we be able to give the same kind of clear testimony that Daniel and his friends gave?

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Last modified: August 27, 2008

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